

Pyrrhonian Buddhism as a Unique Synthesis of Indian and Greek Philosophy

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Adrian Kuzminski. *Pyrrhonian Buddhism: A Philosophical Reconstruction*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 130, €60.00.

Kuzminski's book Pyrrhonian Buddhism: A Philosophical Reconstruction presents a comparative study of Buddhism and Pyrrhonism. Pyrrhonian Buddhism, Kuzminski's novelty, designates a synthesis of Greek and Indian influences on Pyrrho's thought—namely Democritean atomism and Buddhist phenomenalism. It is a philosophical construct that reveals the similarities between the Buddhist and Pyrrhonian models of enlightenment (viz. bodhi and ataraxia). The book examines striking similarities between both Pyrrhonism and Buddhism, suggesting their virtual identity. In Kuzminski's opinion, it is essentially the Buddhist practice and the description of the Buddhist experience adopted by Pyrrho of Elis that resulted in the original synthesis he calls Pyrrhonian Buddhism. Putting Pyrrhonism in the setting of Buddhism and its practice brings a new understanding of Pyrrhonism as the ancient Greek school influenced by the east.

Key words: Pyrrho of Elis; Pyrrhonism; Buddhism; comparative philosophy; historical imagination

Adrian Kuzminski's book, *Pyrrhonian Buddhism: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (2021), is a continuation of an inquiry about the relation between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism explored in his earlier manuscript, *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism* (2008). The current book follows Kuzminski's earlier view on Pyrrhonism as “the sole Western expression of a kind of non-dogmatic soteriological practice found more widely in the East” (Kuzminski 2008: 113).¹ The author discusses some striking parallels between the two philosophical traditions and explains how—via its founder Pyrrho of Elis—Pyrrhonism might have developed into a philosophical school similar to Buddhism.

It must be added, though, that some authors present striking counterarguments opposed to this hypothesis that doubt the abilities of ancient Greeks to speak with Indians in a highly sophisticated way during their stay in India. Even with the help of translators, the communication between Greeks and Indians about complex philosophical questions is controversial.² Nothing proves the seriousness and validity of this argument more than the disinclination of ancient Greeks towards foreign civilizations that they called *barbaroi*. An alternative argument claims that the supposedly oriental elements in Pyrrho's thought do not originate from Buddhism itself but instead are of Greek origin. Authors such as Long (1974) (similarly also Bailey (2002))³ hold that in India Pyrrho could have seen only what he had known from his own culture (for example from the cynic school that is linked with the ascetic practice).

The main difference between Kuzminski's *Pyrrhonism* (2008) and *Pyrrhonian Buddhism* (2021) rests on the author's focus on the philosophical reconstruction of Pyrrhonism, which he calls

Pyrrhonian Buddhism. Pyrrhonian Buddhism, Kuzminski's novelty, designates a synthesis of Greek and Indian influences on Pyrrho's thought—namely Democritean atomism and Buddhist phenomenalism. The term Pyrrhonian Buddhism offers a philosophical account of the possible conceptual evolution of Pyrrho's "most noble philosophy" (D. L. IX, 11, 61) in relation to his encounters with the gymnosophists and the magi, who are associated with the traditions of India and Persia. It is possible these encounters happened as a result of a closer geographical and cultural proximity allowed by Alexander the Great's conquests in India, which Pyrrho was a part of. The term "gymnosophist" (γυμνοσοφισταί) is translated into English as "naked sage" and is associated with ascetic traditions of ancient India. The term "magi" (μαγοί), as Flintoff (1980)⁴ puts it, can mean Iranian priestly magi—members of an ancient Persian clan that specialized in cultic activities. But more likely, the use of the word "magus" in the context of Pyrrho coincides with "gymnosophist" and refers to the holy men from India (Flintoff 1980: 88). This account of Pyrrho encountering Indian holy men can be found in Diogenes Laertius' *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.⁵ It is precisely this account that has led to the view that Pyrrho's philosophy was influenced by his Indic counterparts.

The second major advancement opposed to *Pyrrhonism* (2008) is the increased methodological awareness the author brings to the topic. He draws our attention to questions about the nature of evidence—what constitutes it and what kinds may be available—and about the nature of conclusions drawn. The methodological improvement provided by Kuzminski has broader implications not only for the field of comparative philosophy but also for inquiries in the history of philosophy. This concerns the discussion of the selection of texts that will stand as a basis for the actual interpretation presented by the author. Thus, in contrast to other scholars, Kuzminski makes it clear that the "Pyrrhonian question" should not be about the origin of Pyrrho's philosophy as Indian or Greek. This is because direct influence cannot be proven with the available evidence.⁶ Rather, it would more apt to ask whether there is a possibility of a mutual overlapping or even merging of the two in what the author calls a "seamless whole" (14). As he states, "it is a tertium quid, constructed out of elements common to both Buddhism and Pyrrhonism, using vocabulary from each to illuminate the other. The result is a striking picture, a singular account of human experience into which both movements virtually converge" (10).

However, my intention is neither to compare Kuzminski's work beyond what is necessary nor to reduce it to an extended supplement to his earlier scholarship. In the following lines, I will give a brief overview of Kuzminski's new book. The first theme of the book is presented in the chapter "West Meets East," where Kuzminski actually rethinks the hypothesis about the historical influence of Buddhism on Pyrrho. He speculates about the historical encounters of Pyrrho with Indian śramaṇas—a theme first pointed out by Flintoff in 1980—which since then has become a matter of increasing scholarly interest. Therefore, it is a question of whether the terms "gymnosophists" and the "magi" could refer to contemporary Buddhists. Kuzminski in this chapter holds that definitive proof or disproof of the hypothesis is still lacking (4).

The second major theme of the book is the question of what should constitute an interpretative basis for Pyrrhonism and what sources serve as evidence for the Pyrrhonian question. From chapters two to four, the sources used by scholars are discussed in greater detail. Beyond discussing Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus, the present book introduces another important source known as Aristocles' Passage. It is a fragment from Timon which offers a brief summary of Pyrrho's philosophy. This is a significant source related to Pyrrhonism because, as Kuzminski points out, "it is generally agreed that this [Aristocles'] passage must be the centrepiece of any interpretation of Pyrrho's philosophy."⁷ This central position emerges from the content of the passage, which contains parts from the missing works from Timon—probably Pyrrho's closest disciple and his contemporary. Scholars like Bett, among others, suggest that Timon's account on Pyrrho is more reliable than accounts of Sextus or Diogenes on Pyrrho, who lived more than five

centuries later. At the same time, Sextus' and Diogenes' accounts are mainly based on lost second-hand reports. On the contrary, Timon knew Pyrrho personally, and it is generally presupposed that since Timon held Pyrrho in great honor, he would not dare to compile or reconstruct Pyrrho's thought intentionally. As Bett sums up the matter: "Timon is the most reliable source for Pyrrhonian question" (Bett 2018). Despite Kuzminski's arguments leading to a refusal to incorporate it into the interpretative basis of the Pyrrhonian question, the book analyzes this source in greater detail.

The most intriguing similarities between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism that suggest their identity are discussed in the latter part of the book from chapter 5 ("Pragmata and Dependent Origination") until chapter 7 ("Ataraxia and Bodhi"). These chapters present Pyrrhonian Buddhism as a worldview which offers a path leading to the release of suffering (*ataraxia*, *bodhi*) adopted by Pyrrho, and later continued by the Pyrrhonist school. As Kuzminski puts it: "These parallels are so striking that it is impossible not to consider that both traditions derive from a singular source: a common insight into the nature of human experience first realized by the Buddha, and shared by Pyrrho. The task remaining is to reconstruct this proposed original source—the *tertium quid*—insofar as it informs the two subsequent traditions, and appears to lie at their core. The contrasts in language and idiom, custom and culture, between Greeks and Indians nonetheless reflect, in two separate mirrors, a singular account of human experience" (65–6).

From the Greek tradition, Democritean atomism seems to be the most reasonable predecessor of Pyrrho's thought. Democritean atomism introduces the view that atoms are imperceptible, impenetrable particles moving through the void. However, according to Kuzminski, Pyrrho's encounter with Indian Buddhism led him to reinterpret the Democritean understanding of atoms as real as opposed to fictional entities. As he states, "What Pyrrho might well have done, in trying to understand Buddhism with the mindset of a Greek atomist, is to recognize that the phenomena present to consciousness for Buddhists were in fact the real atoms, very different from the fictional Democritean atoms" (14). Atoms in Pyrrho's understanding are sensations as well as actual and perceptible thoughts. They move within the stream of consciousness, endlessly combining and recombining as the facts (*pragmata*) we immediately experience (14). Kuzminski adds, "It is a distinguishing feature of Buddhist philosophy to begin with the flow of experience in consciousness, as opposed to the motion of objects in external space, as the Greeks would have had it" (16).

In sum, Pyrrhonian Buddhism advances the position that the world exists as endless and ever-changing phenomena displayed in consciousness. These phenomena or appearances are considered as immediately evident and involuntarily experienced. These are immediate sensations or thoughts in our minds. Thoughts and sensations are variously combined into immediate facts of our experience—*pragmata*. That, which is non-evident, are beliefs we hold about these appearances; these are assertions we make in our thoughts. "It is an interpretation of something in terms of something else; a belief or opinion is a judgement whose referent, or object, is asserted to exist, but (so far) cannot be found" (29). The non-evident are, for instance, beliefs about what is good, what is bad, about how should we behave in our lives, etc. These beliefs are just fictions we mistake for truths—a characteristic feature of both traditions. As Kuzminski puts it, holding beliefs in Pyrrhonism mirrors an attachment to things non-evident in Buddhism.

In both traditions, holding beliefs or attachment to things causes suffering. Release of attachment to things non-evident (in Buddhism) and suspension of judgment of beliefs of the non-evident (in Pyrrhonism) present the same path to tranquility. It is precisely this description of experience which is at the heart of both Pyrrhonism and Buddhism. Another striking similarity between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism is that both traditions strive for tranquility. Tranquility is considered a state free from suffering. It is called enlightenment or *bodhi* by Buddhists and *ataraxia* by Pyrrhonists. However, there is not much to be said about this state of being, as it traditionally

refers to something beyond language. It can be only experienced by following the path both Pyrrhonism and Buddhism share.

The methodological design of the book is developed using a method called historical imagination articulated by R.C. Collingwood. “Historical imagination” conceives historical knowledge as an imaginative reconstruction of past events or past states of affairs always via known but often variously or incompletely connected facts (17). The application of this method plays a key role in Kuzminski’s main argument—that is, Pyrrhonian Buddhism represents a hypothetical answer to what might have happened to Pyrrho in India that led him to adopt his philosophy.

What we assume as facts and how to connect them is a creative process serving great many possibilities. It is on point to ask how exactly this connection takes place. This is probably best described in a metaphor when Kuzminski compares the work of a historian to the work of a detective: “the historical imagination fills in the gaps, and the most plausible account—the ‘best’ story—is the one which accounts for more of the relevant facts than any other. Just as a detective tries to imagine the most compelling picture of the facts, the historian does the same. The dots they connect—the clues—are accepted as facts, unless otherwise demonstrated” (18). Reasonable enough, the method of historical imagination asks for much more to be explained.

Besides the creative connection of the relevant facts, the question of how to choose the most plausible “story” according to relevant facts remains open. The author’s description of how exactly historical imagination works is vague. More importantly, Kuzminski, as it seems, pays no attention to explaining how we choose what a relevant fact is to work with. Unfortunately, ignoring this problem leads to the famous but unpopular problem of the criterion. For instance, as it was already stated above, Kuzminski discusses a variety of textual sources of Pyrrho’s philosophy: Sextus Empiricus, Aristocles Passage, Diogenes Laertius. How to best decide what is the most relevant fact to use in constructing the most plausible account of what might have happened in South Asia? Are there any other criteria that provide the equally best picture as Kuzminski presents? The exhaustive explanation of how exactly we connect facts to fit the “best picture” of a historical event according to the proposed problem of the criterion is totally absent in the book. This I consider to be the main weakness of the book, which weakens the persuasiveness of the Pyrrhonian Buddhism project.

The book is also considered a work of comparative philosophy. But comparative philosophy faces some serious challenges these days regarding its methodology (see, for example, Sivin et al. 2018).⁸ Inferring virtual identities between culturally different schools of thought is a current subject of dispute in comparative philosophy. Sor-hoon Tan puts it this way: “The similarity in problems is inevitably identified from a particular standpoint—the standpoint of the inquirer embedded in her particular historical and cultural context(s). That does not invalidate the above comparative approach, but it should caution us against dismissing the significance of the differences in descriptions of what we assume to be ‘similar problems’ when those living in very different contexts do not discuss the problems they experienced using similar or equivalent vocabularies” (Tan 2017: 219).⁹ If this applies to spotting similarities, the same could probably (probably or emphatically?) also be applied to suggesting identities. Whether this is Kuzminski’s case is a matter of debate.

The creative connection of facts entering into an ingenious philosophical reconstruction based on identity spotted still stems from a particular standpoint. This obviously does not invalidate the merit of the book, though Kuzminski’s work is one of those that should definitely lead to reflecting on the proposed problems or questions.

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- ¹ Adrian Kuzminski, *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008).
- ² Decleva Ferdinanda Caizzi, *Pirrone Testimonianze* (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1981).
- ³ Anthony Arthur Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1974); Alan Bayley, *Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonian Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).
- ⁴ Everard Flintoff, "Pyrrho and India," *Phronesis* 25, no. 1 (1980): 88–108, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4182084>
- ⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, transl. Robert Drew Hicks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).
- ⁶ Some evidence has been recently presented by authors such as Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002); Christopher Beckwith, *The Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); and Georgios Halkias, "When the Greeks Converted the Buddha: Asymmetrical Transfers of Knowledge in Indo-Greek Cultures," in *Religions and Trade: Religious Formation, Transformation and Cross-Cultural Exchange between East and West*, ed. Peter Wick, and Volker Rabens (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014), 65–116; Georgios Halkias, "The Self-immolation of Kalanos and other Luminous Encounters Among Greeks and Indian Buddhists in the Hellenistic World," *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, no. 8 (2015): 163–86; Georgios Halkias, "Yavanayana: Buddhist Soteriology in the Aristocles Passage" in *Buddhism and Skepticism: Historical, Philosophical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Oren Hanner (Bochum/Freiburg: Projectverlag, 2020), 83–108.
- ⁷ Richard Bett, "Pyrrho," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Nouri Zalta (Stanford University, 2018). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pyrrho/>
- ⁸ See, for example: Nathan Sivin, Anna Akasoy, Warwick Anderson, Gérard Colas, Edmond Eh, "What Kinds of Comparison Are Most Useful in the Study of World Philosophies?" *Journal of World Philosophies* 3, no. 2 (2018): 75–97. <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp/article/view/2156>
- ⁹ Sor-Hoon Tan, "Justice and Social Change" in *Comparative Philosophy without Borders*, ed. Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber (Bloomsbury: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 205–26.